

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# MT. ST. HELENS STATE WILDLIFE AREA

## History of the Area

On May 18, 1980, Mt. St. Helens exploded to life. The mountain's north flank slid into the North Fork of the Toutle River. Tons of debris and superheated mud flowed down the Toutle, covering the old Spirit Lake Highway and valley floor. Trees on the hillsides were blown over like match sticks. In minutes the river valley was a moonscape.

When biologists viewed the devastation the last thing they imagined was an elk paradise. The only thought was to stabilize the vast amount of debris and mud. The Soil Conservation Service moved quickly to seed the area with grasses and clover. The following year, researchers counted 76 elk feeding on the area.

These elk were survivors of a herd that traditionally moved into the valley each winter to feed in small grassy openings and find shelter in the old-growth Douglas fir covering the hills sloping down

to the North Fork of the Toutle River. During the summer, a small number of elk lived in the area and were often seen by visitors driving the old Spirit Lake Highway on their way to Mount St. Helens before the eruption.

## Elk Return to the Debris Slide Area

Since 1981, the 2,533-acre debris slide has become the most important component of elk winter habitat in the Mt. St. Helens area and one of the most visible elk wintering areas in Western Washington. The herd wintering there has grown from 76 to nearly 500 animals. While concentrations of large numbers of elk are common in Eastern Washington, Western Washington herds are usually more scattered and smaller in size. The large wintering herd that grew in an environment of devastation from Mount St. Helens was completely unexpected.

As the number of elk increased,

overgrazing started to take its toll and the more nutritious plants began to be replaced by poor quality ones. Dependent on quality forage to provide the energy stores to make it through the winter, the elk would face very hard times if this trend continued.

With volunteers and funds from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Department of Wildlife reseeded and fertilized areas to improve winter forage and maintain the Mount St. Helens elk. The next step was to assure that the area remain optimal as elk winter range well into the future.

At the time, construction of the new Spirit Lake Memorial Highway was beginning. The new road was designed to follow along a ridge overlooking the debris slide. With the prospect of millions of visitors passing the area each year enroute to new interpretive facilities at Coldwater and Johnson ridges, the educational value of the wildlife area became apparent.

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## Acquisition of the Wildlife Area

Limited funding almost prevented acquisition of the area. But with assistance from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, an option was designed to secure the property. Two surplus property parcels owned by the department—the 17-acre Abernathy parcel in Cowlitz County and the 159-acre McCumber parcel in Yakima County—were appraised at a value of \$467,000 and traded to the Weyerhaeuser Company for 2,212 acres of the Toutle River debris site. Weyerhaeuser donated the remaining 321 acres to make the package complete.

## The Future

The Department of Wildlife is developing a management plan for the Mt. St. Helens State Wildlife Area to protect the animals and their winter range. The department will continue fertilizing and seeding the area with grasses and clover

to maintain the forage quality the area offers wintering elk. Direct access onto the area will be restricted to protect the habitat.

Visiting the area will be possible only after the new Spirit Lake Memorial Highway (SR-504) is completed in early 1993. With highway access to an overlook of the area, the million people expected to travel to the Mt. St. Helens National Volcanic Monument each year will have an unequalled opportunity to witness Mt. St. Helen's remarkable elk herd.

